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RELATIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF OPPOSING FORCES IN LAOS

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 11 January 1962. Concurring were The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Intelligence), Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF; the Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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RELATIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF OPPOSING FORCES IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the relative military capabilities of the government and antigovernment forces now in Laos, assuming no change in the levels of aid and assistance that have obtained over the past several months.

THE ESTIMATE

1. Both government and antigovernment forces have increased their strength and improved their capabilities during the cease-fire.[1] The government forces, which in May were defeated, demoralized, and near collapse, have made relatively greater improvement. Their regular army strength has increased from about 39,000 in May to 51,500, and their total armed strength to over 71,000. Now they are much better trained and equipped, and they have established some self-confidence. They have extensive technical, logistical, and communications support from experienced US, Thai, and Filipino personnel. This has probably provided the government forces important advantages in supply and mobility. US encadrement of army units down to selected battalions and, in some instances to companies, provides stiffening and tactical guidance in combat. Moreover, in the Meo tribesmen the government forces now have for the first time an effective guerrilla force in the enemy's rear, an advantage previously enjoyed only by the antigovernment forces.

2. At the same time, the antigovernment forces have increased their strength from about 20,000 at the time of the cease-fire to about 34,000. This includes experienced North Vietnamese cadres who provide technical and tactical support and about 3,500 regular North Vietnamese combat troops held in readiness for the defense of key areas or for spearheading attacks on government positions. The rate of improvement of the antigovernment forces has probably been slower than that of the government forces. Training facilities available to the antigovernment forces are limited and many of the new troops, particularly those under Kong Le and Kham Ouane, are probably inadequately trained. There has been evidence of some friction between the Kong Le and Kham Ouane forces on one hand and the Pathet Lao on the other due to inequities in the distribution of supply and jealousy concerning command responsibilities in certain areas. This dissension, and lowered morale in some Kong Le units, has

[1] Estimated strengths

Government Forces		*Antigovernment Forces*	
Regular Army	51,500	Pathet Lao	19,000
Auto Defense	11,000	Kong Le	6,000
Meo Guerrillas	9,000	Kham Ouane (Phong Saly)	4,000
		North Vietnamese cadres	1,600
		North Vietnamese combat troops	3,500
TOTAL	71,500	TOTAL	34,100

contributed to the slower rate of improvement by the antigovernment forces as a whole. The antigovernment forces have received considerable additional equipment from the Bloc since the cease-fire. Most important is the recent arrival in the Plaine des Jarres area of 40–50 PT–76 light amphibious tanks, probably manned by North Vietnamese crews. We believe the most effective use of these tanks would be for the defense of the Plaine des Jarres. Outside this area their use would be limited by terrain to main roads. It is also possible that they could be used in support of operations against major lowland objectives, if a protected debouchment had previously been made.[2]

3. In the past there has been wide variation in capabilities among the units on both the government and antigovernment sides. This is still the case; each has its poor and its elite units, making difficult any overall assessment of relative capabilities. The critical weaknesses of the government forces in the past have been their lack of motivation, unstable morale, and poor leadership at all echelons of command. Recent successes in patrol activity and small-scale attacks, as well as formalized training of officers and NCOs, have increased the self-confidence of government troops and resulted in improved leadership by the commanders. However, the retrained and re-equipped government forces have not yet had a significant test, even in a localized skirmish, and their steadfastness under the strain of serious combat is still uncertain. There have been periods in the past when their morale appeared high in times of relative quiet or success, but deteriorated quickly in the face of adversity. Among the antigovernment forces, morale has not heretofore been a critical weakness. The Pathet Lao have maintained discipline and a relatively high degree of effectiveness over a number of years, in times of adversity as well as success. Their morale is probably good. Among the Kong Le and Kham Ouane forces, however, morale appears spotty and probably only a few of these units would perform well. The morale and combat capability of the North Vietnamese forces probably remain good.

4. Major factors in the present military situation are the changes which have occurred since the cease-fire in the deployment and the missions of the opposing sides. The government forces, with greatly reduced territory to control, can concentrate their strength and maintain some reserves for emergency. Their lines of communication are much shorter and, in general, reasonably dependable. The antigovernment forces, by seeking to control large and widely separated areas in Laos, have increased their logistics problems, lessened their mobility and diffused their strength. Their rear areas have poor lines of lateral communication, and some of those are under harassment by the Meo guerrillas.

5. The terrain and difficulties of conducting conventional military operations in Laos are such that it has always been relatively easy to deny control of territory to an enemy. We do not believe that either side has the capability to destroy the other or even to take over and hold key territory in the hands of the other. If either side were to initiate a concentrated offensive, it could probably make considerable initial gains at almost any point it chose to attack. How long and how well it could sustain its advance or retain control of what it occupied would depend in large part upon the extent to which, and the manner by which, the opposing force chose to challenge it.

6. On this basis, we believe that if the antigovernment forces were to concentrate an attack upon an important government stronghold (including almost any one of the major

[2] Weapons in the hands of the government forces capable of stopping the PT–76 amphibious tank are:

2.36 inch	Rocket Launcher	400
3.5 inch	Rocket Launcher	750
57 mm	Recoilless Rifle	300
75 mm	Recoilless Rifle	38
75 mm	Pack Howitzer	12
105 mm	Howitzer	25
M–24	Tank	19
	Grenade Launcher	7,800
	Antitank Mine	16,700

towns along the Mekong) they could probably succeed but could not hold it against a determined counterattack by government forces. Similarly, we believe that the government forces could make initial gains against antigovernment forces on the Tha Thom-Xieng Khouang perimeter or, with even greater effectiveness, in southern Laos. If defeated by sustained government attack, the Pathet Lao and Kong Le troops would quickly revert to guerrilla tactics of the type they have so successfully employed in the past and could continue to contest government authority over wide areas of the country. We believe that in this event the government forces could not establish firm control over presently held Communist territory, particularly in such critical areas as the Plaine des Jarres and Nhommarath-Mahaxay, and the Tchepone area.

7. In short, we believe that the government forces would have a slight edge if fighting were resumed on a pattern comparable to that prior to the cease-fire but intensified as a consequence of the strengthening of both sides over the past several months. This edge would be increased during ensuing months if the conditions of relative quiet which have prevailed during the cease-fire continue and if recent rates of improvement in the two sides are continued. We continue to estimate that the antigovernment forces have the greater capability for guerrilla warfare. We also believe that if the antigovernment position should be endangered or if the areas considered critical by the Communists were threatened by the government forces, the antigovernment forces would be quickly and effectively reinforced from North Vietnam to the degree necessary to protect the threatened area.

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Based on MAG. chief telegram report
based on two documents.

Second - is conclusive.
CIA chief of station

This revision is based upon performance in the field (victim spot) clothed enthusiasm of Washington, D.C.